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ABSTRACT

Putting shared governance to work in the College of Education at Mississippi State University has been much more difficult than many faculty members anticipated. This case study reports the experiences of faculty members working toward shared governance over the 5 years from 1996 to 2001. The shared governance initiative included a 15-member faculty council. The early exuberance reported in the first study of the process has steadily given way to pessimism because of benign indifference on the part of faculty members and administrators. Poor faculty morale and high staff turnover have also complicated matters and retarded progress. Although some hope remains, the movement toward shared governance is on the verge of extinction as it enters its sixth year. A major finding of this study is that faculty members may prefer talking about the concept of shared governance in the abstract to putting it into practice through a faculty council. (Author/SLD)

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# Faculty Participation in Governance: A Five-Year Longitudinal Study

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**November 14-16, 2001**
**Little Rock, Arkansas**

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**Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association**

HE 034 625



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# FACULTY PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNANCE:

# A FIVE-YEAR LONGITUDINAL STUDY

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Abstract: Putting shared governance to work in the College of Education at Mississippi State University has been much more difficult than many faculty members anticipated. This case study reports our experiences over a five-year period (1996-2001). Our initial experiences in shared governance were first presented at the 1997 annual meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (MSERA). Unfortunately, early exuberance has steadily given way to pessimism due to benign indifference on the part of faculty members and administrators. Poor faculty morale and high staff turnover have also complicated matters and retarded progress. Although some hope remains, the movement toward shared governance is on the verge of extinction as it enters its sixth year of existence.

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Our paper reports the experiences of faculty members to establish and maintain a faculty council for the College of Education at Mississippi State University as the major means for putting shared governance into practice. For the purpose of this paper, the term "shared governance" is defined as "faculty members regularly participating in problem solving, decision making, and policy development."

Based on the belief that a university's colleges and schools are best governed through active, informed participation by their faculty members, the issue of shared governance has been on the minds of America's academics for many years. Advocates for shared governance contend that traditional (top down) administrative practices are ill-equipped to accommodate the need for flexibility and rapid responses to changing conditions in the social, technological, economic, and political environments in which institutions of higher learning function (Lee, 1979; Ramo 1997; Schuster 1991; Wolvin 1991).

Many academics charged with the responsibility of preparing teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, and other professionals for the schools of the 21st century believe that deans and their administrative staffs cannot unilaterally resolve the complex and interrelated issues confronting colleges of education. These academics contend that if colleges of education are to function effectively and efficiently, multifaceted collaborative efforts involving faculty in policy development and decision making need to be launched (Blendinger, Cornelious & McGrath, 1997).

## Research Design

This study traces a five-year (1996-2001) effort to establish and maintain shared governance in a college of education. The paper's authors are "complete participants" in the process because our ongoing study involves a setting in which we are members

and personally witness events as they happened. Although we are no longer members of the council charged with the responsibility of putting shared governance into practice due to term limits and other factors, we have, nevertheless, closely followed events.

Data for this paper were collected through direct observation and analysis of primary source documents consisting of written guidelines, agenda for meetings, minutes of meetings, notes, memoranda, letters, and reports. Documents examined included handwritten and typed material, material prepared for the public record, and material intended only for private use.

## Putting Shared Governance To Work

The 1996-97 academic year marked the start of an attempt to establish shared governance. In the fall of 1995, the members of one the college's many advisory committees, known for doing little, became intrigued with the idea of shared governance. Committee members rolled up their sleeves, established an agenda, and worked toward making shared governance a reality. In the spring of 1996, faculty guidelines were developed and submitted to the faculty as a whole for a vote. The guidelines were approved and a faculty council, one of the major outcomes produced by the guidelines, came into existence.

The guidelines defined the composition of the faculty of the college and the faculty's role in shared governance. Other specific areas addressed included voting eligibility, identification of officers, meetings, and operational procedures.

Once established, the council, comprised of 15 members representing the college's academic departments and research units, moved rapidly to become a viable mechanism for facilitating communication and cooperation between faculty members and the administrators. The council's accomplishments during its first year (1996-97) of operation included:

1. Working with the associate dean for instruction to develop a planning, policy and procedures manual for the college.

2. Becoming involved in revisions proposed for the college's promotion and tenure guidelines. When the dean and the promotion and tenure committee could not come to agreement concerning proposed revisions, the council intervened in the process in an attempt to provide necessary assistance.

3. Addressing the budget allocation process.

4. Surveying the faculty to determine attitudes toward changing the college's name, modifying the governance guidelines, and examining the status of department heads.

5. Scheduling a general faculty meeting, with approximately 99% of the faculty attending, to discuss (1) progress made in preparing for an upcoming NCATE accreditation visit, and (2) the dean's agenda for restructuring the college.

Faculty council members concluded their first year of operation believing they made progress in moving the college toward shared governance. The authors of this paper were charter members of the council (Blendinger, Cornelious & McGrath, 1997).

## One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

Establishing goals to guide the Faculty Council's work for the 1997-98 academic year was an evolutionary step forward. Unfortunately, many of the senior faculty members (tenured full and associate professors) who served on the council during its initial year either retired or rotated off. They were replaced by nontenured newcomers at the assistant professor rank. Two of the authors of this paper rotated off the council.

Goal accomplishment was uneven. Goals addressing the allocation of resources (e.g., faculty travel money) and policy recommendations (e.g., proposed changes to the college's promotion and tenure guidelines) were not accomplished. Influence on administrative decision making was minimal. The council's intention to positively shape the college's organizational culture through establishing displays recognizing and celebrating faculty accomplishments was minimally realized at best. The administration failed to assume responsibility for culture shaping and delegated it

to departments. On the positive side of the ledger, the council's review of the college's required undergraduate and graduate core courses of study in relation to curriculum congruence and instructional quality resulted in the elimination of one required graduate course considered unessential. (Cornelious, McGrath & Blendinger, 1998).

## No Steps Forward, Three Steps Back

The role of the faculty council as a powerful force for shared governance significantly diminished in its third year of existence. During the 1998-99 academic year, the council addressed several challenging issues:

1. Working with the university chapter of Phi Delta Kappa to create a Herb Handley and Cindy Rose display case in the Phi Delta Kappa Reading Room of the Mitchell Memorial Library.
2. Honoring faculty (e.g., retirement, years of service, and outstanding accomplishments) with an annual recognition reception.
3. Identifying objective indicators to assist in the assigning of numerical values to faculty members' annual reviews.
4. Designing an instrument to measure faculty morale.
5. Developing fair methods for determining merit.
6. Revising guidelines for the faculty annual review process.

Unfortunately, the council failed to make satisfactory progress on any of the issues addressed.

The council's influence on administrative decision making was minimal and interest in shared governance diminished. To make matters worst, the last few original members of the council rotated off. Similar to what occurred for the 1997-98 academic year, veteran faculty members were replaced by nontenured assistant professors new to the college. On the positive side of the ledger, however, the council:

1. Unanimously agreed to schedule a meeting with American Federation of Teachers (AFT) representatives for all interested faculty members during the 1999-00 academic year.

2. Gained approval of the faculty as a whole in revising the council's operating guidelines to make them more workable.

3. Unanimously approved a nine-step procedure for faculty members to use in submitting concerns and issues that operates as follows:

   (a) Concerns and issues to be addressed by the College of Education Faculty Council must be presented to the Council Chair in writing with the proposer's name appearing thereon. Upon receipt of the written concern or issue, the Council Chair shall determine whether to first present it to the Council or to the appropriate standing committee for consideration.

   (b) If the concern or issue is first presented to the Council, the question shall be to either take action or send it to the appropriate committee for further processing.

   (c) After considering the concern or issue, the committee to which it has been assigned is expected to provide the Council with a report and recommendations in a timely manner.

   (d) Questions of facts may be asked of the committee following its report.

   (e) Following the questions of fact, debate shall take place on the question of adopting the proposed recommendation, as presented by the committee, as a recommendation of the Council. Amendments may be offered from the floor.

   (f) One recommendation, or more, adequately based on such a report, may be adopted in the meeting at which the report is given only if the committee has provided the members of the Council with a written copy of its report at least three full days before the meeting at which the report is given.

   (g) A proposed recommendation shall be adopted by the Council when it receives the vote of a majority of the Council's members present and voting "aye" or "nay." Each recommendation shall carry with it a notation of the number of members voting "aye," "nay", and abstaining.

   (h) A recommendation of no action, or the failure of a committee to make a report or recommendation, shall not preclude the right of the Council to take further action on a proposed recommendation or a variation of it.

   (i) External Resolutions--The proposing and adopting of resolutions pertaining to persons or matters outside the Council shall follow the procedure of proposed recommendation, for adoption, except that if such a proposed resolution shall have been presented to the Council Chair so as to have been included by him/her in the notification of the agenda to the Council members at least three full days in advance of a meeting, it can be moved for adoption at that meeting.

4. Established three standing committees charged with addressing concerns and issues:

   Faculty Affairs Committee--addresses concerns and issues pertaining to members of the General Faculty, such as equity in course assignments, merit increases, annual reviews, complaints, etc.

   Student Affairs Committee--addresses concerns and issues pertaining to students, both undergraduate and graduate.

   College Affairs Committee--addresses concerns and issues pertaining to the administration of the College of Education, such as budget allocations, resources provided, policy violations, morale studies, etc.

In summary, the council accomplish little of tangible substance during the 1998-99 academic year (McGrath, Blendinger, & Cornelious, 1999).

## No Steps At All

The phrase "no steps at all" appropriately describes the council's work for the 1999-00 academic year. College faculty members were preoccupied with a long overdue task force report on restructuring the college and eroding morale. Little attention was given to the council's work. To make matters worse, the dean advocated replacing the council with an information disseminating umbrella group that would include administrators and clerical staff in addition to faculty. The 1999-00 council accomplished little:

1. Establishing display cases in the Phi Delta Kappa Reading Room of the Mitchell Memorial Library were never accomplished.
2. Honoring faculty (e.g., retirement, years of service, outstanding accomplishments, etc.) with an annual recognition reception did not occur.
3. Objective indicators to assist in the assigning of numerical values to faculty members' annual reviews were not developed.
4. An instrument to measure faculty morale was not designed.
5. Fair methods for determining merit were not identified.
6. Guidelines for the faculty annual review process were not revised.

7. Meetings with American Federation of Teachers (AFT) representatives for all interested faculty members during the 1999-00 academic year were never scheduled.

8. Procedure for faculty members to use in submitting concerns and issues to the council were never utilized.

In brief, the council accomplished nothing of significance during the 1999-00 academic year (Blendinger, Cornelious & McGrath, 2000).

## The Worst Year Ever

The 2000-01 academic year was even worst than the preceding one. Reasons for earning such an odious distinction were as follows:

1. The Faculty Council met only once during the academic year.

2. No reports were made to the faculty in general regarding what business matters the council addressed.

3. Council members do not recall following an agenda at the meeting.

4. No minutes of the meeting were kept.

5. Although the dean of the college attended the meeting and addressed those council members who were present, no one can recall anything of significance that was said.

The 2000-01 academic year will not be remembered as a good one for the cause of shared governance. Faculty morale continued to erode and many senior professors retired. The exodus of professors to other institutions of higher learning accelerated. Many academics, including the dean and key administrators, resigned to take jobs elsewhere.

## What We learned Over the Past Five Years

What have we learned from five years of experience in attempting to establish a process of shared governance in the College of Education at Mississippi State University? One major finding is that college of education faculty members may prefer talking about the concept of shared governance in the abstract more than

implementing it through the means of a faculty council. This finding appears to explain the faculty's apathy toward the whole notion of shared governance and why little concern was given to who served on the council. Other key findings are:

1. It's extremely difficult to maintain interest in shared governance through a vehicle such as a faculty council in a college of education at a university that has an active and well-establish academic senate that represents all the colleges and schools comprising the organization. Faculty members appear to have difficulty internalizing how their local council differs from the university-wide senate.

2. A college council doesn't function well unless it's led by committed, senior faculty members.

3. Administrators, such as the dean and department heads, may regard a faculty council as compromising their own authority.

At present, shared governance in the College of Education at Mississippi State University is on the brink of extinction. Faculty interest in wanting to share in the governance process has waned. Apathy is high. Faculty turnover continues unabated and morale remains low. Maintaining shared governance in our college has not been an easy task and the future appears dismal.

In closing, it should be noted that very few colleges of education are involved in shared governance through vehicles such as faculty councils. The reason may be that formal shared governance procedures are not needed nor wanted. We simply don't know. With the exception of our work, little has been published in the literature about shared governance operating at colleges of education. More actual anecdotal cases, such as the one presented in this paper, are needed to develop an authentic literature base addressing this important topic.

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